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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a course designed for first year college students, including prospective teachers, entitled "Cultural Diversity in America." Its major goal is to raise consciousness about cultural differences and encourage students to articulate their own cultural perspectives. Based on the premise that knowledge about pluralism enhances one's capacity to live with, accept, and appreciate diversity, the course consists of two components: (1) acquainting students with issues of race, class, and gender through a study of scholarly essays; and (2) acquainting students with the perspectives of a selected number of ethnic groups through the study of minority-authored autobiographies. Evaluative measures include a formal assessment instrument, three essay examinations, and a critical analysis paper. (LL)

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# BEARING WITNESS: A SEMINAR ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY FOR TEACHERS

by

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Paper presented at the Fifth National Forum of AILACTE
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# BEARING WITNESS:
# A SEMINAR ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY FOR TEACHERS

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**BEARING WITNESS: A SEMINAR ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY FOR FUTURE TEACHERS**

I recently designed a course entitled "Cultural Diversity in America" for first-year college students. I wanted to devise an offering that would be more than a "sampler" of different cultures. My intent was to provide a genuine support to students in the basic tools of analysis, exposition, and structured thinking in order for them to grapple holistically with the concept of diversity as a "prompt" to continue their exploration of ethnic studies in other courses. In essence, I envisioned this course as a way to provide an intellectual context for critiquing and reflecting on issues of diversity that students will hopefully encounter in more specialized areas such as African American Studies, Asian Studies, and Women's Studies.

The linkage of the concept of diversity to the essential mission of a university seems compelling. A recognition of the importance of educating students to live effectively in a multi-cultural society entails a curriculum capable of edifying about and for the pluralism of which they are a part. I wanted my course to stand as a contribution toward this effort.

I also believed that my endeavor could positively contribute to teacher education as a programmatic theme. Prospective teachers should be reflective decision-makers able to deliberate and synthesize theory and practice. This notion can be further enhanced by envisioning teachers as reflective thinkers in a pluralistic society. After all, we need few reminders that today's classrooms are increasingly filled with growing numbers of

culturally diverse students. By the end of this decade more than one-third of the school-age children in America will be non-white.

In a concept paper that I wrote for students in the course, I noted that "Cultural Diversity in America" was based on the premise that knowledge about pluralism could enhance our capabilities to live with, accept, and appreciate diversity. In addition, I assumed that a pluralistic society required mutual accommodation. As an appreciation of diversity is a requisite for pluralism, an ability to account for the needs, dignity, and worth of others is a prerequisite for a humane society. Maintenance of a democratic community is dependent on continuous discussion and appraisal of substantive ethnic issues.

I translated these general guidelines into two overall learning components that were more suggestive than prescriptive:

1. Students will become acquainted with issues of race, class, and gender confronting a selected number of ethnic groups through a study of scholarly essays.
2. Students will become acquainted with the perspectives of a selected number of ethnic groups through the study of minority-authored autobiographies.

I selected Ronald Takaki's <u>From Different Shores: Perspectives on Race and Culture in America</u> (1987) as the main text for my course. Authored by a respected scholar in ethnic studies, this book offers a fine selection of essays concerned with ethnic, class and gender issues. Takaki explains the intent behind

his anthology:

> From Diferent Shores refers to the multiple origins of Americans- how our roots can be traced to Europe, Africa, Latin America, Asia and North America itself. Who we are and how we are perceived and treated in terms of race and ethnicity are conditioned by where we came from originally. But the title also describes the different and conflicting ways scholars have approached and understood the experiences of racial and ethnic groups- how they have stood on different shores in terms of their viewpoints (p. 9).

I also selected for required reading four autobiographies representative of different cultural experiences in America: Richard Wright's Black Boy, Richard Rodriquez's Hunger of Memory, N. Scott Momaday's The Names, and Mary Doyle Curran's The Parish and the Hill. These choices were arbitray ones. Rather, I tried to adhere to Banks' (1991) suggestion that "groups that vary in cultural characteristics, geographical location, socioeconomic status, racial characteristics, history, and level of assimilation should be selected for study" (p. 489).

The requirements of this course also included the writing of a Critical Analysis Paper. Students could choose one book from a list of authors ranging from Carlos Bulosan to John Edgar Wideman. This assignment entailed detailed responses to the following questions:

**What kind of knowledge is assumed in the reader by the writer about the author's culture? Is it your impression that the author believes that you know much about his/her culture?**

**To what extent is the author actually a part of the culture that he/she writes about? Is there any estrangement that you can detect between the author and his/her culture?**

**What confrontations with the majority culture does the author have and what strategies does he/she employ to overcome obstacles?**

**What is the author's view of society? Does he/she have any gender prejudice or religious bias, for example?**

**In what ways has the author enhanced your understanding of his/her culture?**

**Evaluative measures included a formal assessment instrument and student products such as three essay examinations and the Critical Analysis Paper. I also encouraged students to keep a journal to record personal reactions to the topics we discussed, since I wanted to nurture cognitive and affective responses.**

**The major goal, then, of this course was to raise consciousness aboout cultural differences and to encourage students to articulate their own cultural perspectives. My approach is not**

meant to be a template for a single conception of an ethnic studies course but rather an attempt to confront the need to define America with college students. What makes this effort so invigorating is that "many of us stand on different shores and have different definitions of America. . . . America keeps eluding a final definition. Ours continues to be an unfinished society, increasingly diverse in race and ethnicity" (Takaki, 1987, p. 219).

Endnotes

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